DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 399 936 IR 056 051

AUTHOR Webb, Jean A.
TITLE The Politics of Children's Literature.
PUB DATE 93
NOTE 7p.; In: Dreams and Dynamics. Selected Papers from the Annual Conference of the International Association of School Librarianship (22nd, Adelaide, South Australia, Australia, September 27-30, 1993); see IR 056 045.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Access to Information; Books; *Childrens Literature; Child Role; Decision Making; Elementary Education; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Government Role; Library Funding; *Politics; Publishing Industry; *Reading Material Selection; Selection Tools; *Student Empowerment
IDENTIFIERS Barriers to Participation

ABSTRACT

Politics and children's literature would seem to be two areas of thought which are incompatible; politics being the administration of power, control, government, and regulation, and children's literature embodying the freedom of the imagination at a period in life described as "literary innocence." Embedded political perspectives, whether religious, social, or gender based, affect the selection and availability of children's literature. The paper discusses the following issues and their political effects on children's literature: the nature of the publishing industry; opportunities for new writers; marketing trends; foreign children's books and related language and cultural translation issues; matching of illustrations with text; independent book production units; book selection; government reading lists; school library funding and quality of maintenance; and the lack of ability for children to make their own reading selections. The paper also describes a pilot research study which looked at the way 5- to 6-year-old and 10- to 11-year-old children select books, their knowledge about books, and what qualities they value and like in books. The dream is a democratic approach to book selection, and giving children a voice in the complex world of children's literature. (SWC)

The Politics of Children's Literature

by
Jean A. Webb

For the past four years I have been running children's literature courses and a summer school at Worcester College of Higher Education. This has variously involved a great deal of discussion with publishers, writers, illustrators, librarians, and teachers plus those involved in the commercial book world. the information contained herein has been gathered from these experts and academic sources. I would like to thank them for their enlightening and open conversation, particularly Chris Kloet, editor of Gollancz Children's Books, Julia MacRae, and Emma Marwood, manager of Waterstone's Bookshop, Worcester, England.

During the spring of 1992, I spent six weeks working on a book review project with primary school children aged five to eleven, and am currently supervising a group research project on the same theme. Some of the information from these projects is also incorporated into this paper.

Politics and children's literature would seemingly be two areas of thought which were incompatible. Politics being the administration of power, control, government, and regulation, whilst children's literature embodies the freedom of the imagination at a period in life which Margaret Meek describes as "literary innocence."[1] The lack of innocence of the writers of works for children has long been recognized in the awareness of embedded political perspectives, whether they been, for example, religious, social, or gender biased.[2] A host of interested parties: teachers, librarians, editors, not to forget responsible parents, each with their own set of criteria, read critically to guard the nature of the child's world of imagination. The world surrounding books for children would apparently focus upon literary and artistic merit, moral soundness, high ideals, whatever they might be. This,most sadly, is an overly innocent view, the dream of the idealist, for the dynamics of the practical world and the resultant political tensions militate against the interests of children and literary merit.

Who then is involved in this dynamic network? Which individuals and agencies play a part in the process of bringing a book to the child? A simplistic model would put the writer and the child in the most dominant positions, for without them the book could not exist. Ideally the child would be in a direct and unimpeded line of communication. However, there is a range of influences which intervenes between the writer and the child audience/-reader and potentially detracts from the power of the creation.

The writer must publish the work. "Which publisher," is the next question; the answer to which raises a number of barriers. The choice in the U.K. is considerable, or is it? During the current period of recession the number of publishing houses is contracting. Large corporations dominate. The familiar, individual house which once displayed a particular identity may well be a small part of a large publishing machine, and therefore, governed by a large publishing machine, and therefore governed by the business and literary requirements of he parent body. Individuality is eroded by corporate ownership. The independent style does not earn sufficient capital to survive in a highly competitive market. The career of the publisher, Julia MacRae, as an example of independence, is an exception, a testament to her determination, critical judgement, shrewd business sense and pertinent movement in and out of larger organizations.

The current nature of the publishing machine in the UK disempowers the author. The usual pattern is that a children's book pays by being printed initially in hardback and then the rights are sold to the paperback companies. The sales curve for a book to prove solvency is eighteen months. Warehouse storage space is so expensive that companies no longer carry extensive back lists. The cutting of back lists effectively acts as an instrument of widespread censorship by the publishing industry. The right for a book to exist is that it should meet high economic criteria, regardless of literary worth. The chances of future generations of children discovering and enjoying a rich literary heritage diminish with each cubic foot of storage space saved. The literary past is abandoned to silence.

The implication of a streamlined publishing industry for the professional writer is that a new book must be produced at least

every one and a half years to stand a chance of economic survival under the present requirements, whilst the editor must be sure that the work will sell on to the paperback market. The relationship between editor and writer is driven by strong external influences. Large corporations have a fluid staffing pattern. The case of editors developing a close working relationship with writers is becoming more unusual. There are editors who still strive to work in a personal fashion. Julia MacRae, Chris Kloet, for example, who nurture and advise. The publishing system also works against them for the paperback and newer softback production companies can offer larger rewards due to their greater sales. In other words of an aggrieved editor of quality hardbacks, the paper and softback giants are "gobbling up people nurtured by other houses."

Opportunities for new writers are increasingly difficult to bring to fulfillment. Risk is an unpopular word where success is an instant demand. Throughout publishing history there are instances of major writers and recognized classical works being repeatedly rejected at the first stages, from the Brontes and Charlotte's famous tattered brown paper parcel, to William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, to Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, which was kept waiting by forty four publishers before it was finally accepted. Conservatism is creeping into the limited opportunities which remain for the new author. The comment on the 1992 Mother Goose Award, which is given for the most promising new illustrator, highlights the current situation in the following assessment given by Sally Grindley:

> This was not a vintage year for Mother Goose Award. There was a startling lack of innovation, and a sense that someone, somewhere is playing safe. Art schools, or publishers, or both?[3]

Tried and tested soon becomes tired and overstretched as the pool of talent shrinks through lack of opportunity.

Marketing trends are therefore determining the rate of output which very often bears a direct relationship to quality. Aiden Chambers, in his speech at the IASL Conference in Belfast last year, spoke of the length of time required to consider and create a book; the personal case he quoted was that of fifteen years to complete a trilogy. Literature is not a production line profession, yet those are the conditions which the authors are being asked to work under if they want to survive the highly competitive short-lived market ethos of today. Certainly strategies can be employed to ease the problems, note the number of sequels, however the danger is that quality deteriorates under such pressures.

A strategy which does, however, readily spring to the British mind is that of widening the pool of available material by using the best of European children's books. Each springtide the Bologna Book Fair attracts the major publishers from across the continent, here must be the ideal opportunity to enable a rich cultural and literary mix, whilst using proven successful writers. The reality is that each successive year fewer new children's books in translation are published in the UK. The figure for 1991 was under ten. The cost of translation plus the reader's fee are prohibitive, for that outlay is made before any decision is made upon the suitability of the text. The general practice is to buy European books not from our continental neighbors, but from the Americans who have purchased the items, translated them into American-English and then recycled them to the British who translate them into English-English! How close they are to the original would make an interesting study in cultural exchange. The mixing of markets, and therefore the multiplicity of market demand upon the writer becomes a dominant factor with regard to Europe, the UK, and much further afield. A children's book is judged for viability upon whether it well sell on the home market, the large English speaking areas of America, Australia, New Zealand plus European and translation possibilities into Japanese, for instance.

The resultant books are on the whole retaining their sense of character, as long as that character translates within the boundaries of another culture. The censorial judgement of the editor is a strong element here when arranging such matters, particularly with illustrators. One English illustrator, Heather Buchanan, who specializes in architectural exactness, was prevented from including a Welsh cottage in her work because it would not have been acceptable to the wider requirements of the foreign readers. The result is on one hand a very bland cultural representation which rests nowhere in particular, and on the other a mismatch mix which incorporates elements which are confusing for the adult who can define the roots, and must therefore be in danger of

utterly confusing the child. An example of such an anomaly occurs in a widely distributed 1992 picture book from one of the major companies, which disturbingly introduces an old man dressed in the style of a Southern American farmer, replete with straw hat and overalls, whereas the rest of the setting is clearly typically that of rural England. Muddle results in the mediocre and weak books, whilst in the best of work there is a learning experience in the melding of fact and fiction. The editor clearly has a role to play here in terms of stipulation of requirement and guidance.

Some writers and illustrators in the UK are dissatisfied with editorial and mass market constraints and are therefor circumventing publishers and setting up their own book production units. Time will tell as to the success of such ventures. One suspects that their efforts will be limited by the extent of their advertising power. Disseminating knowledge about children's books becomes increasingly difficult as the number of books escalates. There were seven thousand and six books for children published in the UK last year, which leads one to a consideration of book buyers, how they choose books, what are the sources of information available and how these dictate choice.

The sales route of a book depends upon the category of buyer, adult, child, teacher, or librarian. Book shops divide roughly into high street generalist stores and the purer book shop. They mat be but a short walk away from each other. The discerning buyer moving from the high street store to the specialist book shop, does so in the belief of gaining particular expertise from the book shop. Corporate ownership also dominates the world of selling. In most cases the book shop will be part of the high street chain, although such is not made obvious to the customer. Where such alliances impact upon the customer is in the quality and range of children's books available. Book shop manager are issued with a central core of books from the corporation supplies office. The same list applies to the high street store and the book shop. In effect most of the book shops in the UK are therefore making the same books available. Particular book shop managers have to fight hard to free themselves of the dominant core, and to fight also for the specialist children's book sales person. There are some independent alternative specialist children's book sellers scattered throughout the UK who refuse to be dictated to; their survival is precarious. Without specialist people, we are thrown back upon extant knowledge, and exterior sources. The bulk of children's books are bought from shops during the period prior to Christmas, from the end of October to the holiday. Typically the sales over these few weeks equal that taken for adult books in an average week throughout the year in an equivalent shop. The conclusion to be drawn is that the majority of children's books bought from shops are presents bought by adults for children.

Choices are made on the knowledge of what the adults read as children, the strength of advertising, what is perceived to be good, the advice of the shop assistant and random selection. With current publishing and marketing considerations it is already becoming clear how the adult is controlled and disabled by the politics of the children's book world. The limitations on back lists will increasingly lead to a deterioration of the adult knowledge of children's books, as argued above, and therefore one of the most common approaches to book selection is nullified. The sharing of familiar and beloved books is also threatened; the adult recalling the love of their own childhood reading through known texts and imparting an extra quality of appreciation to the following generations. Communication becomes a central factor in a multiplicity of ways. The adult can no longer depend upon a body of prior knowledge, and the shop assistant may well be little better equipped than the customer, under these circumstances advertising is a most powerful force.

Where can the bewildered adult buyer look for guidance and information? Publisher's catalogs contain abstracts which are often written before the actual book has been competed, so great are the pressures of time upon the industry. They certainly do not seek to mislead, one wonders how well they are able to inform under such constraints. Readily available information about children's books is limited to a fifteen minute weekly BBC radio program "Treasure Islands" produced by Michael Rosen; albeit excellent, the time allocated is pitifully little out of the broadcasting year. In Sweden, for example, there is a regular and long running book review television program for children, hosted by an academic, it is nevertheless a most popular source of information and entertainment for both children and adults. The medium which is so often accused of threatening the book is there

being used as an effective means of promotion for non-commercial purposes.

Information regarding children's books obviously divides between commercial and non-commercial interests. Publisher's catalogs and the information disseminated by book clubs must be promotional, whereas non-commercial sources would seemingly be free from driving pressures. Educational and specialist journals, charitable foundations such as the Children's Book Trust, the library services which advise are still pulled into the commercial melee, for the children's book awards form a central focus in terms of guidance. The awards are mostly generated by the publishing industry and few include children as judges. An award indicates that the work "is good;" how that value judgement is qualified remains a mystery to the non-specialist, yet the power of the award label is so great that paperback publications carry covers emblazoned with award medallions, indicating immediate selection for the buyer.

Selection criteria are of paramount importance in the current UK climate where the government is so dominating education through the formulation and reformulation of the National Curriculum. The constant change combined with a higher onus of responsibility upon the parent derived of nervousness about the quality of education their child is receiving is resulting in more books being bought for children which are perceived to be "good." The qualification for that "goodness" is inclusion in the government recommended reading lists in the National Curriculum. Party political thinking is exerting a most direct power upon the imaginative lives of our children. Commerce and politics are firmly linking hands in the literary world, especially under a government which believes in market forces. Book shops are reporting sales levels of children's books which seem to be little affected by the recession; the customers being middle class parents who are wishing to supplement what they perceive to be educational needs.

Direct parental involvement in schools is often centered upon the library. The non-teaching school librarian is a rarity in secondary education, confined to the very largest of institutions, whilst primary school libraries are usually run by teachers who carry full teaching responsibilities apart from their library commitments. Parental help is therefore vital to the running of many school libraries. The teacher with special responsibility for the library, yet no specialist training, is therefore dependent upon the School's Library Service for specialist help. Shortly this service will have to be bought in by schools under changes in funding arrangements made by a government which believes in market forces. The average size primary school generally receives less than one pound per head per annum for expenditure upon library books. The projected cost of a School Library Service visit to provide a fresh source of books on a loan system will be equal if not in excess of the current average school expenditure upon library resourcing. At the moment schools are used to a least two such visits per year to maintain their book stock, additional to the current expenditure upon books.

This is a clear political pressure upon the quality of library maintenance in schools. Even more obvious are the cutbacks in library provision which are impoverishing the public service. The 1964 Libraries Act recognizes a duty to provide an efficient and comprehensive service. Our Prime Minister, John Major, in a speech to his own constituents in 1992, declared that "Civilized nations open libraries," yet in 1993 the political dynamics of his government are destroying those dreams. Library provision is being severely cut due to budgetary constrains emanating from government decisions; opening hours are restricted, sixty two percent of libraries now open for less than ten hours per week, whilst the Sheffield Central Children's Library was threatened with closure.[4] The publication of the report "Borrowed Time? The Future of Public Libraries in the United Kingdom" in June 1993, has highlighted the obvious threat and misunderstanding of the library service,[5] yet there are also insidious covert changes which impact upon the quality of provision specifically for children.

As with book shops, the tendency is to move away from the specialist trained children's librarian and to employ general assistants in the children's book area. Change in practice is also affecting book selection. Children's librarians are being pressured to move toward selection from catalogs rather than reading the actual book. The implication is that the reading matter for children is so low profile that it can be recommended without even being seen. Needless to say there is strong resistance from the committed librarians on behalf of the children. Librarians, teachers, and parents speak on behalf of children, and so do academics in developing the specialist subject

area of children's literature The development of research and theoretical consideration which brings literature for children on a par with that for adults can only be positive. Children's literature should be subject to equal opportunities for study and not debarred on what are otherwise ageist criteria.[6]

Having widely scanned the world of children's literature what becomes so apparent is that ageist criteria are being employed, children are marginalized from knowledge about books which are being written for them. The "Puffin Book Club Newsletter" is the only source of information available for children known at the time of producing this paper, and that, right so, has a specific commercial purpose. As far as I know there is no wide scale source of information produced by children, except for example the annual Smarties Book Prize, and that is aiming towards specific results. Children are the silenced group. The work that Mary Ann Paulin presented at the IASL Conference in Belfast last year, focussed upon producing child critics using the language of adult criticism. Perhaps there are ways in which a critical language for children may b e developed to encompass the stages prior to the more sophisticated critical concepts required by literary analysis--ways in which the child may be politically empowered by being given a voice and an audience.

During the spring of 1992, I carried out a short pilot research study looking at the ways in which children select books, what their knowledges are of books, and what they value and would like. This was designed very much as an investigative venture to look at considerations to underpin a doctoral study which will begin this coming September. The age groups targeted were five to six year olds and ten to eleven year old children within the same primary school. The school already had a formal book review inclusion in their curriculum. For the young children it worked on a five star system referring only to whether the book was appreciated, not why, running on a scale from "Brilliant" down to "Yuck." The results were recorded on a wall chart as paper stars. For the older children the requirement was a written report in a personal review book. The report including a resume of the story and hopefully some opinion on the characters Neither of the review process involved other children or discussion with the teacher. The use of review techniques which equate to a soliloquy, I suspect, is not very difference in most British schools.

Group discussion (group sizes varied from four to thirty five) focussed initially upon what the children knew about books, what they needed to know, and why, and how that could be encompassed in an effective means of communication pertinent to the age and ability level Knowledge about books was erratic, and this was a school which has a respected reputation for literacy in the locality. Selection by author was there among the older children, mostly they went for attractive covers and books where they could read the title. *I Like Me* was a popular selection. It was not, however, a popularly acclaimed book following the reading, whereas *Maurice's Mum* was initially rejected because of the difficulty of the word "Maurice," yet it was subsequently very much enjoyed for the inventive nature of the story and the number of good jokes in the text.

The emphasis was initially very much on talking about the books to other children. Confidence and enthusiasm high, we then moved on to the problems of disseminating information about books in a lively and interesting fashion. The traditional book review was not highly regarded as an effective tool; a new approach had to be conceived. The older class of thirty five children read the picture books designed for the younger age group. This in itself was a most enlightening exercise. For example, barriers were broken down, enabling the less able older readers to assume an equal status with their more fluently reading peers. The picture books were appreciated for their subtle qualities which are often recognized by adult readers. The children then decided to make a book review video. Methods of presentation were varied. One group composed a rap complete with original music on a theme of their book. Others read the story to camera, selecting points at which the camera panned in a close up using the text directly whilst others acted parts of the story. The dramatic element developed more fully in other areas where the children assumed comic personas of well known television personalities gathered together to discuss the books. There were agree criteria, that the title and author should be clearly communicated.

Clear communication need not necessarily be dependent upon words. An infant's school teacher is currently working on the book review project She has four to five year old children in an educationally deprived urban school which also draws upon a

disadvantaged rural area. The young children there are communication their energies and thoughts about the books to other children through pictures. They draw a response. It may be from the text, or allied, using very much their own style. Appropriate words are added in consultation with the child. The review art is then displayed with the book available for children to read. High levels of interest are being generated by these procedures, interest from the children about books and communicating ideas.

Communication is the way to break through the stifling atmosphere of political control. Hopefully, the Book Review Project will establish networks of communication between schools. There are already seven involved in the early research stages. Wider benefits continue to evolve. The teachers are more assured o their selection and literary criteria whilst gaining a more expert knowledge of current publications, for the books reviewed by the children as part of this project are all up to date publications provided by the publishers. Interest levels in the pilot schools are high, children making greater efforts with their reading, seeing an outcome, communication their thoughts and feelings, wanting to use the library for they have an ownership in the ongoing active processes which are affecting their environment. The oppressions of control and ignorance which have been reviewed in the early stages of this paper are being attacked. In conclusion the dream of this dynamic enterprise is knowledge, a democratic approach and giving children their voice in the complex of the world of children's literature, a world they should so freed share with adults.

References and Notes

1 M. Meek. *The Cool Web*. Bodley Head, 1977. p. 10.

2 See for example:
B. Dixon. *Catching Them Young 1: Sex Race & Class in Children's Fiction*. Pluto, 1977.
B. Dixon. *Catching Them Young 2: Political Ideas in Children's Fiction*. Pluto, 1977.
A. Lurie. *Don't Tell the Grown-Ups*. Bloomsbury, 1989.
R. Leeson. "The P.E.N. Ultima," *Books for Keeps*, May 1993. Report on "political correctness" as enforced upon writers by the publishing industry.

3 Sally Grindley. "The Mother Goose Award," *Books for Keeps*. May 1993, No. 80.

4 BBC television June 1993 "Open Space" program on the threat to the national library provision compiled by the Association of Assistant Librarians and the Information and Library Studies Library at the University of Wales, Aberystwth.

5 "Librarians Told to Turn Over a New Leaf," *The Guardian*. June 24, 1993, p. 2. and "Closed Minds Closed Books," *Leader* comment, p. 25.

6 Lissa Paul. "Enigma Variations: What Feminist Theory Knows About Children's Literature" in P. Hunt, ed. *Children's Literature*. Routledge, 1990. p. 148.